

Medicine



GUNTER FAMILY

and Miracles

When this Bay Area OB/GYN became a patient, she had to draw on strength they don't teach in med school

By Kristy Lund

Above, Dr. Jennifer Gunter celebrates life with her sons, Victor, left, and Oliver, who survived premature births, while their brother did not.

"I don't buy lottery tickets anymore," 43-year-old Dr. Jennifer Gunter says. "I feel I've already won the lottery."

This is a surprising sentiment, as Dr. Gunter is talking about life after losing a son.

Dr. Gunter works for Kaiser Permanente in San Francisco and is the only board-certified OB/GYN and pain-management specialist in the United States. She has been published in numerous medical journals, received high honors for her research and, before having children, co-authored a chapter in a medical text titled "Emergencies During Pregnancy." Currently, she

writes a sexual health column for Examiner.com.

But in a tragic piece of irony, her expertise couldn't protect her from her own heart-breaking introduction to motherhood. Before moving to the Bay Area, she was living in Colorado and was pregnant with triplets. When her water broke at 22 1/2 weeks, she didn't need to be told that the odds of survival for infants born this early are in the single digits. The team tried to stop labor, but one day later, her eldest son, Aiden, was born. He lived just over three minutes.

Distraught with grief, she waited for labor to continue. Miraculously, it didn't.

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Gunter experienced what doctors call a delayed interval delivery when her two remaining sons' membranes stayed intact, something she likens to winning the lottery. Put on hospitalized bed rest, she repeated over and over, "We just need to make it to 26 weeks," when the survival odds improve to about 80 percent. Each sunrise, she would celebrate that they were one day closer.

On the first day of week 26, an infection she was fighting made it impossible to wait any longer, and her sons, Oliver and Victor, were born via Cesarean section. The boys were sicker than expected and given a 50 percent chance of survival.

Grieving one son while caring for two preemies was not easy. Comments such as "well, you still have two" did not make her feel any better. When asked what got her through the dark period of losing a son, and then having to be strong for her two sons fighting for their lives, she explains, almost apologetically, how it was something actress Nicole Kidman said that changed her life. "Right after the boys were born, I was watching Jay Leno and lying on the couch thinking, 'Ugh, my life is hell, my kids are going to die, what the hell?' And Nicole Kidman was on. It was right after her divorce with Tom Cruise. You know, divorce is like a death. But Nicole Kidman's dad gave her this great advice. He said, 'It is what it is. It's not what it was meant to be, but it is what it is.' It was like the light bulb went off... that was just *it* for me."

Gunter says after that point, she knew she couldn't look back and wonder *what if*. "It is what it is; think forward," became the mantra she would recite to herself daily. The mantra didn't protect her from depression as she worried for her remaining two boys' lives and grieved Aiden's passing, but it helped her to frame the situation and advance with each day.

The next year was dedicated to caring for her sons. Both were on oxygen for a year due to their premature lungs and the high altitude in Colorado. She says she was fortunate to have eight months maternity leave with 50 percent pay. But when it was time for her to return to work, her children were still struggling with their health. Her husband, Tony, an architect, quit his job to stay home.

Fortunately, Gunter worked with the Colorado hospital where her children were cared for. Still, as she experienced the system as a patient, she was horrified at the confusing maze of insurance authorizations and the amount of inaccurate bills they received from the hospital. Gunter writes in the September 2006 journal *Obstetrics and Gynecology*, "I am saddened to say that there are health care professionals who

have treated us as if our medical problems have somehow inconvenienced them. I have been brought to tears by careless comments. At times, I have felt that some doctors, nurses and support staff do not understand that they are in the business of helping patients. Certainly, many forget that patients are very vulnerable."

Gunter did her own research on the many afflictions her sons encountered due to their prematurity. Using her pain-management specialty to speak the hard-core science talk with the researchers, she was soon giving her doctors tips and they were urging her to write it down for others.

One such example is how her son, Victor, had bad reflux and would vomit out of his nose after each feeding. Since he was on oxygen, it would go down the tubing, the tubing would need to be replaced, his nose suctioned and new tubing put back on. The only medicine that would work wasn't approved, but after doing the research and working with the insurance company, Gunter had its usage approved. She jokes that at that point, her pediatrician asked her to work for his office.

It was her sons that brought the family to the Bay Area, as

Oliver kept getting pneumonia. The altitude of Colorado was hard on his premature lungs, so the family moved to Mill Valley, which sits close to sea level.

Gunter's sons, now 6, are often the subjects of touching blogs she writes for the Writing Mamas Salon.

Still, the road ahead is not all clear. Oliver lives with a

heart condition that will require another surgery (his third) once he is full-grown. Her other son, Victor, while leading an active life, suffers from a thyroid condition and cerebral palsy. Still, Gunter says that doesn't stop them from being like other 6-year-old boys.

Life is full with two boys and a career, but Aiden's loss will always be with her. Gunter writes in a blog post, "I wouldn't say that I am whole again, but I am mended, like a china cup that slips from soapy hands. I have been glued back together – but the cracks remain."

Keeping with her forward-thinking mantra, Gunter is determined that her painful experience will benefit others. She is finishing a book titled *The Premie Primer* (Da Capo). She hopes her research and time spent in the hospital will help others have an easier time navigating the rough terrain of prematurity, something she feels is her personal duty. "I don't think it will make me rich or anything," she says, "but I think it will make me happy." ■

Kristy Lund is a Bay Area-based writer and a mother of two.

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